

THE MIND OF THE MASS MURDERER

The Nazi Executioners—and Those Who Stood By

L. POLIAKOV

THE author remembers very clearly the time when, some years younger than he is now, he played at hide and seek with the German and Vichy police, as did the large majority of the Jewish population of France. Humiliating imprisonment, painful forced labor, misery without end—this was what he saw as the terrible price of capture. But that he was fleeing a gruesome death in huge factories of extermination—that simply did not cross his mind.

Such an attitude was the usual one: Cassandra voices were rare; and the warnings sent out by the British radio were generally considered to be the inevitable exaggerations of wartime propaganda. The mind resists what exceeds its experience; the existence of an industry of death for death's sake was difficult to accept. Among the Jewish masses in Poland there was the same tendency to resist the evidence, notwithstanding the proximity of the death camps. As for the free world, in the United States and England, in spite of much and widely diffused information, numerous doubters could be found up to the very day that the advance of the Allied

armies laid bare the complex workings of the machinery of Maidanek and Auschwitz.

Since then, with the limits of the impossible rolled back by these discoveries, the human species has become the richer for a new experience; the term *genocide* has made its entry into international usage. "A shame that will weigh on Germany for a thousand years!" exclaimed Hans Frank, one of the defendants at Nuremberg; for a while the very idea of a German became identified with that of a criminal and barbarian. It is characteristic of public opinion to be as forgetful as it is emotional; yet the fact remains that in the long and varied history of the human species, the Nazi enterprise stands without rival—something irreducible in the practice of evil, a "special case," as Elliot Cohen rightly puts it.

But even if *homo hitlerius* is a special sort of being, we still want to know how he became what he was. Whoever can bring to that question a satisfactory and penetrating answer will probably have put his finger on at least one root of the maladies that agitate our contemporary society. My intention is more modest: merely to look into the recesses of the souls of these criminals, who, after all, were only men. What was the make-up of the technicians, big and little, of the German mass-production death industry? And, over and above the universal factors that may be revealed, what can be further disengaged as specifically German factors?

WHAT kind of men are they that organize and supervise concentration camps in which they murder whole groups, classes, and races of their fellow human beings? What is the mentality of the broader strata of the population who apathetically witness this ghastly extermination without even a protesting murmur? L. POLIAKOV here presents a documented analysis of the psychological matrix of genocide. Mr. Poliakov is research director of the Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine in Paris. In numerous articles in *COMMENTARY* and elsewhere, he has set down some of the fruits of his studies of the catastrophe that befell the Jews—and the human spirit—under Nazi totalitarianism. His latest book, *Bréviare de la Haine* ("Breviary of Hate"), was published recently in Paris, and the present article is drawn to some extent from the materials of that book. This article has been translated from the French by George J. Becker.

AMONG the German documents captured by the Allied armies there is one almost unique of its kind, a violent protest addressed to German Supreme Headquarters by General Johannes Blaskowitz, commander-in-chief in the East, on the subject of "anti-Jewish excesses" committed by the SS in Poland. The report is dated February 1940, a time when a *démarche* of this kind was still possible; after that we find no more such documents. Among the reasons advanced by

Blaskowitz in support of his protest, we come upon the following: "But the worst effect on the German people brought about by the present condition of things is the unconfined brutality and moral depravity that will spread rapidly like a plague through the most worthy German human material. If the high functionaries of the police and the SS resort to violence and brutality and speak out publicly in praise of it, then in no time at all violence will reign. With disconcerting speed, persons of like minds and tainted character get together, as they have done in Poland, in order to satisfy their bestial and pathological instincts. It is scarcely possible to hold them in leash, for they are bound to feel themselves authorized by official behavior and justified in any cruelty."

This source, it will be agreed, is an authoritative one, and the German general's reasoning suggests a first answer to the question we have asked ourselves: *psychopaths* exercised an essential role in the execution of the Hitlerian program. The Death's-head SS, which provided the cadres for surveillance, was selected from the SS, which in turn had been recruited from the young activists of the party. The personnel chosen for this task seem to have run to perverts and sadists, in the strict clinical sense of the terms. Apparently, in a country of more than seventy million people, there were more than enough of these types for the job.

It is not a pleasant account, but perhaps the reader will have some interest in dipping into the intimate journal kept by one of these lucid madmen—an intellectual, moreover—a Dr. Kramer, a physician at Auschwitz.

1 September 1942. Wrote to Berlin to order a Führer cap, belt, and suspenders. In the afternoon was present at the disinfection of one of the blocks with Zyklon B to destroy lice.

2 September 1942. Went out around three this morning to be present at a special action* for the first time. In comparison, Dante's *Inferno* seems almost a comedy. It's not for nothing that Auschwitz is called an annihilation camp! . . .

5 September 1942. Present this afternoon at a special action on prisoners from the Jewish camp (Musselment†), a horror of horrors.

* *Sonderaktion*, a Nazi term used to designate large-scale gassing of deportees.

† Prisoners having reached the last stages of

Dr. Thilo was certainly right when he said to me this morning that this place is the *anus mundi*. In the evening around eight another special action on a group of Hollanders. The men like to take part in these actions because of the special rations which they get on such occasions: a fifth of a liter of schnapps, five cigarettes, 100 grams of sausage, and bread.

6 September 1942. Today, an excellent mid-day meal: tomato soup, half a chicken with potatoes and red cabbage, *petits fours*, and wonderful vanilla ice cream. Around eight o'clock out again for another special action, the fourth I have witnessed.

23 September 1942. Last night around six or seven a special action. During the morning Obergruppenführer Pohl and his staff arrived at the Waffen SS house. The sentry before the door was the first to salute me. At eight in the evening, dinner with Obergruppenführer Pohl in the Führerheim, a real banquet. We had pie—as much as one wanted—real coffee, excellent beer, and sandwiches. . . .

7 October 1942. Present at the ninth special action. Foreigners and women.

11 October 1942. For dinner today, Sunday, we had roast hare—a whole thick leg—with dumplings and red cabbage. All for 1.25 RM.

12 October 1942. Inoculation against typhus, as a result of which strong general reaction with fever in the evening. Nonetheless out during the night for another special action: 1,600 persons from Holland. Frightful scenes in front of the last bunker! This was the tenth special action.

And Dr. Kramer's journal continues like this, alternating his notations of carefully numbered "special actions" with menus of the meals he particularly enjoyed or descriptions of the social activities at Auschwitz. For the killers had, amongst themselves, a quite flourishing social life. As Blaskowitz wrote: "With disconcerting speed, persons of like minds and tainted character get together . . . in order to satisfy their bestial and pathological instincts."

IF THERE were large numbers of psychopaths among those who ran the death camps, this does not yet explain entirely the mind

physical and moral enfeeblement were so designated in the camps.

of the executioner. In the German-occupied areas of the Soviet Union, there were no large death factories, no highly rationalized methods requiring the participation of only a limited number of "technicians." Instead, the victims were usually disposed of by shooting, quite openly in the light of day; at least a million Jews were killed in this way. These killings were carried out by detachments of police, the *Einsatzgruppen*, who traveled in the rearguard of the Wehrmacht. And here the selection of executioners was entirely fortuitous: purely by the vagaries of the mobilization order, certain men were taken out of the whole body of the German police on the eve of the Russian campaign and attached to the *Einsatzgruppen*. Their total number was around 3,000. We are thus confronted with an entirely random cross section of the German police force—here was no special psychological predisposition for the macabre task.

The *Einsatzgruppen* sent daily reports to Berlin, drawn up in the laconic and precise terms of military language: you get the impression you are reading a report on the campaign against the potato bug. Here is one example:

- 1) With respect to the armed forces which are conducting searches, it is absolutely necessary to supply them with axes, hatchets, and other similar instruments, since it has been observed that almost all doors, etc., are rusted or locked shut and can be opened only by force.
- 2) Even if at first sight there is no apparent access to a loft, the possibility that there are persons hiding there must still be considered. As a rule it is necessary to search every loft carefully, if necessary even from the outside.
- 3) Even if there is no cellar, persons are often to be found hidden in the narrow space between the ground and the floor. It is a good idea to remove some boards from the outside and send in police dogs (at Pinsk the police dog "Oste" did wonders) or to toss in a hand grenade, which inevitably forces the Jews to come out of their hiding places.
- 4) It is a good idea to sound the area around houses with a hard object, for many people conceal themselves in well-camouflaged holes.
- 5) It is recommended that the help of youngsters be secured in seeking out hiding places by promising them their lives will be spared. This method has been reported to be particularly effective.

As for the executions themselves, the reports introduce us to a new system of semantics developed for the operation: we find a vast arsenal of special expressions to designate the killings, a veritable burgeoning of terms, demonstrating even a certain degree of imagination. Along with such terms as "shot" or "executed" or "liquidated," one reads in these documents that a certain number of Jews have been "rendered inoffensive," or that the authors of the reports have "got rid of" so and so many Jews. Other expressions are more vague: "At Nikolaev and at Kherson, 5,000 Jews respectively were treated." Sometimes the idea is conveyed without words; the reports of Group A are embellished with a map inscribed with figures—and coffins. Certain regions have been "liberated" or "cleaned up" of Jews, or the Jews have been "taken care of." "Special treatment" is another widespread euphemism. But the most polite, the most discreet, and the most definitive term is "final solution"; in a given region "the Jewish problem has been definitively resolved." And so forth.

IN THE fall of 1947, one of the twelve major trials of war criminals conducted by American military justice at Nuremberg placed former members of the *Einsatzgruppen* on the benches of the accused. The trial, conducted with extraordinary fairness, lasted for nearly six months; each of the accused, interrogated successively by counsel, prosecutors, and judges, had ample opportunity to explain himself, and certain depositions were virtual confessions. To be sure, these men were fighting for their lives: but this fact, far from necessarily undermining the value of certain admissions, often leads, on the contrary, to some astonishing psychological revelations.

Orders from above: this was the primary excuse behind which the accused sought refuge. But they invoked not only this physical compulsion; there was also a certain sense of duty and even propriety—of a peculiar nature, to be sure. One of the killers, a defrocked Protestant pastor named Biberstein, when asked whether he did not sometimes feel disturbed by these interminable shootings carried out without the least semblance of trial, replied: "I am not a lawyer. . . . My

predecessor, who had considered these questions fully, was a *Volljurist** [qualified lawyer] and told me that everything was in order. I felt obliged to accept his opinion." This remarkable servant of God assured the court, moreover, that he had kept his religious sentiments intact; when the presiding judge asked why he had not felt it his duty to give his services as minister to those he was causing to be sent to a better world, he said, "I had reason to suppose they were atheists. . . . There is a parable, your Honor, 'You shall not cast pearls before swine.'" And he continued as from the pulpit, imperturbably: "When one spreads the word of God, one must not introduce it in situations where it is not fitting, when one is fundamentally convinced that the ground is not prepared for such a message."

At another trial of war criminals, Ugo von Woysch, a high Nazi dignitary, when questioned in the capacity of voluntary witness about certain statements that Himmler had made in his presence, produced this incredible sentence: "The Reichsführer SS was speaking and, if I may be permitted to criticize my former chief, his remarks were interminable."

Such was the quality of mind among Nazi executioners, even on the highest levels. The secular tradition of discipline, the practice of *Kadavergehorsamkeit*—blind obedience—provided a favorable soil for the growth of a bizarre psychological fruit—colorless, odorless, tasteless, and murderous.

BUT significantly, these men, unlike the professionals of the death factories, seem to have found no perverse satisfaction in the massacres they carried out. On the contrary, complaints about the "heavy task" imposed upon them keep recurring like a leitmotif. Thus the witness Graf: "The men of the Waffen SS told me that they would rather have fought in the front lines than remain here. I asked why and they answered: 'We don't want to say.'" Defendant Ohlendorf: "Many men suffered terribly and had for various reasons to be sent home, either be-

cause their nervous systems went to pieces, or because they could no longer stand it morally." Defendant Haensch: "One rule was laid down, according to which it was necessary to avoid forming 'commandos of shooters'; that is, it was necessary not to utilize the same men for successive executions." From the defendant Blobel, we have this pearl: "Our men who took part in the executions suffered more nervous strain than those who were to be shot." One of the reports of the Einsatzgruppen says: "Physical fatigue was easily tolerated by our men. Far more important was the extreme psychic strain placed upon them by the great number of liquidations. It was only by constant reminders of the political necessities that morale and decorum could be maintained."

Whatever the social and ideological supports that helped the killers in their task—iron discipline, devotion to the Führer, collective excitement, and emulation in savagery—certain more direct stimulants, and alcohol chief among them, were found to be indispensable. Immense drinking parties took place before and after the massacres. One German official, returned from a mission in the occupied territories, reported: "The Jews are taken aside and liquidated [and] the situations which arise are so anguishing that they cannot be described. The consequences for the German commandos are inescapable. In general the executions can be carried out only if the soldiers are stupefied with alcohol." It is true that there were exceptions to this rule. In the account of another witness we find that: "The action [at Novogrodek] was the work of a special SS commando, which, because of its idealism, carried out the executions successfully without recourse to schnapps."

In this context, the novel semantics of the Einsatzgruppen reports, of which we spoke earlier, yield their full meaning. The executioners could not bring themselves to look frankly at their work. They had to pretend that what they were up to was something other than plain murder. Their bestiality was, by the magic of verbal circumlocation and by reference to a fictitious state of affairs, translated into something normal and ordinary. In some reports, indeed, the mechanism of self-deception reaches astounding heights.

*A lawyer having completed a full course of studies and holding a state diploma. But no translation can render the particular tonality which *Volljurist* has in German.

Thus the leader of a commando reports: "The Jewish women have exhibited particularly disobedient behavior; for this reason 28 of them were shot at Krougloye and 337 at Moguilev." Or, "The Jews have shown an impudent and provocative attitude" or "have given proof of bad will toward their work." Einsatzgruppe B reported that an epidemic of scabies had broken out in the ghetto at Newel: "In order to prevent contagion, 640 Jews were liquidated. . . ." Group C reported that at Radomychl "it was impossible to furnish provisions for the Jews and their children. Consequently the danger of an epidemic was increasing. In order to put an end to this situation, 1,107 adult Jews were shot by the commando and 561 children by the Ukrainian militia." Certainly a bizarre way to combat epidemics!

He who has decided to drown his dog accuses him of madness. The Einsatzgruppen, committed to blind obedience, had to invent all sorts of good reasons for doing what they did. And they had also, as we noted, to invent a special off-hand and neutral manner of expression to make themselves believe that they were really engaged in doing something quite different. As a result, they converted themselves from men into frozen and mutilated souls. But the very need to deceive themselves may be taken as testimony that they still had—souls.

AS HAS been said, the exterminations in Russia were carried out by light of day, "as if on a stage," writes the Wehrmacht officer Major Rössler, whose eloquent protest merits quotation: "I have never seen anything like it, neither in the First World War, nor in the civil war in Russia, nor in the campaign in the West. I have lived through a good many unpleasant things—I was a member of the Freikorps in 1919—but I never saw anything like this. I find it impossible to conceive on what legal basis these executions are carried out; all that happens here seems to me completely incompatible with our views on education and behavior; in an absolutely open manner, as if on a stage, men are murdering other men. According to the accounts of soldiers who are often present at spectacles of this kind, some hundreds of people are thus killed daily."

If we consider that thousands of Germans—soldiers or members of the civil administration—were eyewitnesses of exterminations carried on in this open manner, then we may hope to find in their reactions to the spectacle an especially precious insight into the agonizing question of Germany's "collective guilt." Documents are not lacking: protests by officers and high functionaries were numerous and often impassioned. But their tone differs strikingly from the courageous accents of Major Rössler, whose protest is, to my knowledge, unique in its kind. This central idea can be summed up as follows: it is not in this manner, not in a manner so ostentatiously brutal, that *Germans* should "resolve" the Jewish problem within the framework of the New Order of Hitler, though it is certainly to be understood that such "resolution" can mean only one thing, the total disappearance of the Jews. Guilt was not felt for the deed whose necessity was accepted, but for the method, which somehow dishonored the national decorum.

"Mass executions have been carried out in a manner which does not correspond with our German conceptions," complains one high official. "Insufficiently dense occupation of the front lines makes it possible for civilians to flee to the Soviet lines and inform the Russians of what they have seen. Thus the mass executions of Jews, carried out in part in a manner not in keeping with our German ideas, have not remained a secret from the Russians. . . ." Even more revealing is a report drawn up by Heinrich Lohse, Gauleiter for the Baltic countries: "That the Jews must receive special treatment demands no elaboration. But that such things have taken place as are related in the attached report is scarcely believable. What is Katyn in comparison? What if these occurrences become known to the enemy and are exploited by him? If propaganda based on these facts should remain ineffective, it will be only because hearers and readers will find it impossible to believe."

Extermination of the Jews, then, goes without saying, "demands no elaboration"; but it should be carried out in such a way as not to shock German sensibilities, and above all should remain discreet, silent, unknown. Meanwhile, if some insufficiently hardened

young officers show a certain degree of emotion, they must be called to order, as we see in this extract from the daybook of an infantry division: "On the morning of 5 August several hundred Jews were shot at Rositten. . . . The divisional commander addressed to officers and men a grave injunction to abstain from all criticism and all personal attitude in regard to this situation." And the high military leaders, without ever intervening actively, take pains to hold the ordinary soldiers of the Reichswehr on the sidelines, publish orders and circulars forbidding them to take part in executions, forbidding them to take photographs, etc. Later, the perfected procedures adopted at Auschwitz and elsewhere, the recourse to "professionals," were to satisfy in part this truly collective wish of Nazi Germany: to get rid of the Jews without having to watch them die.

THE phenomenon which psychologists designate by the term "collective unconscious" is unexplored; it constitutes a delicate and deceptive terrain, on which one can advance only with extreme caution. But one cannot help thinking that there is a close relation between the sadistic behavior of the professional killers in the SS and the disconcertingly ambiguous reactions of the amateur killers and the multitude of witnesses involved in the murders carried out by the Einsatzgruppen. Among the operators of the death camps, consecration to an ideology had removed all inhibition, permitting perverse instincts to be satisfied with full liberty. But the other zealous, but more "normal," followers of the Führer, who had also been nourished on the propaganda of hate, had not rid themselves of all civilized inhibitions; in a multitude of souls this led to insurmountable conflicts, and for many a citizen of the Third Reich the extermination of the Jews constituted the only remaining way to put an end to a situation which had become intolerable. May not this be one of the reasons why, though the "final solution" horrified them, they yet sought it eagerly: once there were no more Jews, would not the executioners' torment come to an end?

Thus in the degree that the fate of the Jews became worse, as they were despoiled, ghettoized, starved, and killed on a greater

scale, collective hatred of them grew proportionately, and their total extinction was desired with increasing ardor. Indeed, a careful study of the Nazi archives reveals that extermination could not be said to have been deliberately projected during the years which preceded the war, but grew up in the course of the war in the Nazi orders of the day, through a sort of progressive and ineluctable elaboration. Even the word "*Endlösung*" meant at the beginning no more than the expulsion of the Jews, their elimination from the "German national body," and it was only by stages that it took on a more and more sinister meaning.* But—the history of many a crime informs us of this—it is in proportion to the wrong one does one's victim that one hates him more and more; and in this way the forces of evil, patiently nourished, end in explosion.

OF COURSE, the question of "collective guilt" spreads far beyond the circle of those who actually participated in or witnessed the Nazi massacres. Whether or not we believe it possible to draw up an indictment against a whole people, it is obviously of the greatest interest to inquire what was the reaction of the German populace as a whole to the treatment meted out to the Jews of Germany and of all Europe.

Abraham said: ". . . wilt Thou also destroy and not spare the city for the fifty righteous that are therein?" The fifty righteous of Sodom and Gomorrah, and many times more than that, existed in Hitler's Germany also. There was Canon Lichtenberg, who, imprisoned in October 1941 for his pro-Jewish sermons and public protests, asked the Gestapo to transfer him to the ghetto of Lodz and died in 1943 in the camp at Dachau. There was Anton Schmidt, sergeant-major in the Wehrmacht, who helped organize underground communication among the Polish ghettos. There was the anonymous German doctor who voluntarily followed his Jewish wife into the Warsaw ghetto and was killed there in the final battle of April 1943. Examples of this sort would certainly reach hundreds, perhaps thousands—and most will never be known. They have an important

*See "Eichmann: Administrator of Extermination," COMMENTARY, May 1949, by this writer.

place among the manifestations of German resistance against Hitler, which, however sporadic and ineffective, was nonetheless a living reality. But, generally speaking, such was the poisonous effect of the all-pervading Nazi propaganda and terror, and perhaps also the collective predispositions, that the German people remained as a group passive and inert, if not, as we shall see, actually guilty of complicity in the face of the murder of the Jews.

IN ANOTHER case, they did resist: the degree to which the popular will might make itself felt even in Nazi Germany is strikingly revealed in the history of another vast homicidal enterprise of Hitlerism, one which has remained relatively unknown precisely because it was broken off under the pressure of popular indignation. I refer to the "euthanasia" program for the killing of the mentally deficient and the mentally ill.

This program was introduced by a secret order of the Führer dated September 1, 1939, that is, on the day of the declaration of war. Its execution was turned over to the private chancellery of the Führer and was supervised by Karl Brandt, his personal physician. For operational purposes, Germany was divided into six regions, in each of which a "euthanasia station" was set up where the inmates of institutions for the insane and mentally deficient, both adults and children, were put to death, in groups of 15 or 20, through asphyxiation by carbon monoxide gas. In the course of two years nearly 70,000 victims were "liquidated" in this way. Although the program was surrounded with strict secrecy and the sudden deaths of the sick were explained to their families as resulting from "natural causes," the truth was not slow to leak out to the most diverse circles. The Lutheran and Catholic clergy made open and insistent protest. In certain cities, when the sick were being moved, crowds gathered and actual riots took place. In August 1941 the program was suspended—until the end of the war. Its personnel, more skilled from the experience thus acquired, were transferred to Poland, where they exercised their macabre abilities in the first camps for the extermination of the Jews—Chelmno, Belzec—which had just been organized. One of them, Dr.

Fritz Mennecke, asserted during his trial in Nuremberg that the Führer had been led to suspend the euthanasia program when his special train was held up by a threatening mob which had just been present at the removal of sick persons.

THIS is perhaps only a legend; but in this case how significant! No crowd ever gathered at the removal of Jews, who at this same period were leaving German cities for the East. Their departure took place amid general indifference. And yet they were not people who had been cloistered in asylums, but very recently had played a vital part in the life of the community.

Still further evidence comes from the German writer Muller-Claudius, who in 1942, when deportations were going full blast in Germany, made a series of secret observations concerning the reactions of his compatriots. He found 5 per cent enthusiastically in favor of the anti-Semitic program, 5 per cent definitely opposed, 21 per cent doubtful and disturbed, and 69 per cent absolutely indifferent. Another German author, Enno Kind, writing about the German resistance movement, states: "The year 1941 was marked by the beginning of the extermination of the German Jews; all the adversaries of the regime, as well as those who were neutral, were from that point on obliged to give proof of their personal courage in not abandoning their friends who were being persecuted by Hitler. And it must be admitted that the larger part of the indifferent elements gave up on this occasion the last feeble flickerings of resistance and passed over to the fascist camp. Thereafter humane sentiments had scarcely any place in Germany."

Thus the terrible fact seems to be that the response of most Germans to the most enormous organized crime in history was one of total indifference, essentially a deliberate effort to remain ignorant of everything having to do with the place, the time, and the specific content of the crime—an attitude which markedly assisted the Nazis in maintaining the veil of secrecy which they attempted to throw over their work of extermination. It was not means of information that was wanting: an indefinable mixture of fear, of shame,

and perhaps also of tacit connivance kept the mass of the Germans from wanting to know. And even today, the Germans maintain a dreadful, frozen silence over this most important fact in their national history: in the house of the hangman, too, one speaks not of rope.

ONE must note, also, another specific aspect of the Nazi crime against the Jews which involves a truly active participation by large segments of the German population—as receivers of stolen goods.

I do not speak merely of the involuntary and passive participation by the citizens of the Third Reich in the enrichment of the community and of the state as a result of the confiscation of Jewish property, the imposition of collective fines, etc. Nor yet of the innumerable cases of individual pillage in occupied countries, concerning which the astonishing Blaskowitz report, cited above, expresses itself as follows: “. . . there is naturally nothing surprising in the fact that the individual German makes use of every opportunity to enrich himself; he can do it without danger, for when the community in its entirety engages in robbery, the individual thief need not fear punishment.” What concerns us here is the organized and systematic distribution of the last earthly possessions of the millions of exterminated Jews, which were gathered and sorted in immense warehouses set up in the death camps themselves, afterwards to be distributed through the welfare bureaus and charitable agencies of Nazi Germany, under the characteristic label (invented, it would appear, by Himmler himself) of *Jüdisches Diebes-Hehler- und Hamstergut*—“goods stolen, received, and hoarded by Jews.”

At the Auschwitz camp alone, the warehouse for pillaged goods, known under the name of “Canada,” comprised 35 vast barracks and was staffed at certain periods by more than 2,000 prisoner-clerks. And we find in the records of the Winter Aid Society of Poznan province, for example, certain documents constituting a matter-of-fact complaint over a consignment of dresses because “a large number of the garments are soiled, partly covered with dirt and bloodstains; in one consignment of 200 dresses to the city

of Poznan, the yellow star had not been removed from 51 dresses.” Or, again, a circular from the central SS administration in July 1942 pointed out to the commandants of the camps that “the concentration camps have sent packages of clothing . . . certain ones of which contained articles stained with blood and damaged by bullet holes. Some of the packages were badly packed, so that persons not connected with the administration were able to learn of their contents.”

And there are other documents that reveal how clear and obvious it must have been to the recipient what the source was of the bundles of clothing used to assist needy Germans in the difficult days of war.

“Goods stolen, received, and hoarded by Jews.” What shall be said of the people who took these heartbreaking garments for themselves and their children, and—complained of the stains?

IT REMAINS for us to ask to what degree the collective spirit—even when so receptive as that of the Germans—can be successfully molded to the form set for it by the leader of a totalitarian mass, using for his purposes all the technical resources of the modern world. Was the great goal of the SS capable of realization? Hitler’s dream of a society of “beasts, violent, hard, and cruel”—could it have been brought into being?

Perhaps in the complex reactions of the killers, such as we have seen them to be, we may find one answer to this question. That self-deception of the murderers, their persistent malaise, even their self-pity, do these not express a mute protest, a confused recognition that in bringing death to others, it was a part of themselves that they destroyed? We come back, then, to what seems to be the deep-seated essence of Hitlerism: a burst of resentment, hate, and fury which, avidly directed at others, must in the final analysis inevitably turn in upon itself also. May we not be led to conclude that over and beyond his revolt against the Judeo-Christian spirit and ethics, the Führer was attacking a necessary and essential element of all human society: that it is inherent in the nature of man to see himself in others and to revere in them his own image and his own essence (the double signification of the word “humanity,”

identical in all languages, can have no other meaning). And may we not draw the further conclusion that vast collective killings, though they may be carried out with relative impunity in the course of battle, where combatants act within the ceremonial and legal framework of the art of war and are subject to reciprocal risk, cannot be used by one camp to exterminate to the last man those of the other camp—no longer as adversaries or as men, but as noxious insects—without wreaking psychic self-destruction on the perpetrators? To deny this image of man in the other is to kill it in oneself—and so mass extermination becomes national suicide.

It may be added that the history of the human race confirms this speculation, and so do the investigations of anthropologists. We are quite wrong when we attribute to savage or half-savage peoples a cruelty without limit or scruple. In all civilizations and among all races, making no exception of the most primitive peoples, the murder of a man, the assassination of an enemy, has always been a serious thing, heavy with consequences, subject to restrictions, expiatory ceremonies, and taboos without numbers. Whatever the complex psychic reasons, this is an absolutely universal rule.

Thus, however astonishing the powers which the modern totalitarian demiurges may wield, there will always be certain limits to the perversion and the robotization of even the most docile masses. It was only in a society of men devoted to death that new aspects of human behavior were able to develop; by a sordid irony, it was only among slaves, exhausted and moribund in the hell of a concentration camp, that the total excision of the moral sense of which the Führer dreamed was capable of achievement on a large scale.* But the sacrilegious attempt of the executioners carried the seed of its own destruction.

Such seems to be the lesson to be drawn from the ruins of the Third Reich. In contrast to the somber speculations about the future which abound in our unquiet day, perhaps this lesson may help us to face with somewhat more confidence the distant perspective of civilization in a technological age. Dehumanization, we have seen—and perhaps the world is ready to draw the moral from Hitler's ghastly demonstration—is self-murderous.

*Compare my article "Human Morality and the Nazi Terror," COMMENTARY, August 1950.